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GNOSTICISM—A STUDY IN LIMINAL SYMBOLISM

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Victor W. Turner's article, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*", is well known.[1] The article is primarily an analysis of symbols. Turner presents a brilliant model for the symbolic structure of a period in ritual which has hitherto been considered to be insignificant and rather confused. He lays stress on the inner meaning of the rituals, and knits together ritual, myth and society into a cohesive structure. This type of theory, which opens perspectives on the structure of symbols in different areas of culture, is basically useful in the study of the history of religions. Because of difficulties in finding an acceptable external point of reference within this field,[2] it is natural to concentrate upon the internal logic of a given religious system: not, in the structuralistic way, to determine the external relationships between the various factors, i.e. their "grammatical" structure, but to discern the internal meaning of the different factors and their combined system of meanings. The result could then be correlated with sociological, psychological or historical perspectives.[3]

In religion, the consciousness of the believer is expressed through myths, and the original experience is locked therein.[4] The problem for the researcher is to reconstruct their meaning and examine their intention. This may be done by means of a theoretical model which fits their symbolic structure and makes it intelligible. Turner's theory about the liminal period in the rites of passage offers that sort of model. It interprets the religious facts and correlates them with social realities.[5] The theory has been fruitful in ritual-analysis. In this article, his observations concerning the liminal phase will primarily be applied to an analysis of myths.

I

In general, all rites of passage are characterized by three phases: separation, *limen* (or margin) and aggregation.[6] According to Turner:

> The first phase of separation comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment from the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions (a "state"); during the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the "passenger") is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state; in the third phase the passage is consummated.[7]

Turner characterizes the liminal phase as having a lack of structure and as the initiand being "betwixt and between". It is the peculiar character of this phase which makes the transition and transformation possible. Liminality is basically characterized by being without structure, but is the source and seedbed of positive structural assertions. The lack of structure is combined with a richness of symbols. The symbolism is often modelled on human biological processes, seen as equivalent to structural and cultural processes and to processes which take place within man. Aspects of human physiology are used as models for social, cosmic and religious ideas, and the human body is a symbol of different levels of existence. The "passenger" is viewed as structurally "invisible"—he is "at once no longer classified and not yet classified".[8] This paradoxical situation is often expressed by symbolism connected with death and decomposition on the one hand, and with embryos and birth on the other. The sex distinctions are blurred, and the liminal persons are treated as neither male nor female or as androgynous. The cultural and social bonds no longer exist. The same symbolism is used to connect antithetical processes, for example, symbols related to both birth and death.

The liminal persons are often secluded from the structured society. They have nothing, "no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows".[9] The social structure of the liminal phase is very simple: the instructors have complete authority over the neophytes, who are totally submissive to the instructors, and there is complete equality among the neophytes (*communitas*).

The liminal period is the period when what Turner calls *gnosis* is achieved. Although the change of being takes place in the liminal phase, it is not activated until after the aggregation into the higher state. *Gnosis* is communicated through myths, exhibitions of sacred articles and through actions. Instructions contain the main outlines of cosmogony, theogony and anthropogony, and frequently the

secret names of the deities and spirits. Turner observes that the *sacra* communicated are characterized by disproportion, monstrousness and mystery. According to him, these characteristics are meant to force the neophytes into making cultural abstractions and into reflecting over the elements of their society and culture, and over the powers that generate and sustain these elements. The factors and building blocks of existence are in this way torn apart and made the subject of thought. It is the phenomena and processes of the liminal period "that paradoxically expose the basic building blocks of culture just when we pass out of and before we re-enter the structural realm".[10]

According to Turner, liminality and its social correlate *communitas* do not only appear in primitive religions, but may arise in different forms in complex societies as well.[11] Liminality may be institutionalized in societies with a high degree of specialization and complexity and develop a dialectic relationship with the surrounding structured society.[12] As one of his examples of permanent liminality, he mentions the monastic and mendicant orders in the world religions.[13] Our thesis is that *gnostic religion* furnishes a parallel to that type of permanent liminality.

Gnostic religion flourished during the 2nd, 3rd and 4th century A.D. as one of the major and more puzzling religious movements in the world. This article will examine some of its characteristic traits as viewed according to the pattern of the rites of passage. The meaning and function of gnostic religion are in different ways related to the meaning and function inherent in this pattern, and especially to the liminal period of the rites, as will be demonstrated below. The central concern of gnostic religion as it is presented both in the Nag Hammadi Library and by the church-fathers, is the fallen soul of man which must be restored to its original dwelling-place, that is, the *pneumatic* (spiritual) world above. Its cosmology describes the structure of the world above and below through which the soul once descended, and its soteriology deals with the final ascent of the soul through the cosmic spheres. The gnostic rituals are the sacraments of baptism, anointing, eucharist, chrism and bridal-chamber, which separate the believer from the world, ensure him a safe passage through the different stations on the journey, and finally transform his soul into a state of salvation.

The gnostic cosmos through which the soul passes is tripartite: The world above which is the source of *pneumatic* being, the world below which is material, and between these worlds, the intermediate realm of the *archons*, the rulers of the seven spheres of the planets.[14] The world above is the home of *pneuma* (the spiritual soul) from which it once descended and sank into the material world below, from which it must begin its ascent. At both the descent and the ascent of the soul, it must pass through the archontic realm of the middle stage. According to our thesis, this tripartite cosmological topology may be seen as a structural equivalent to the tripartite pattern of the rites of passage.

On the ritual level matters are more complicated, since the gnostics often had a negative attitude towards rituals and regarded them as belonging to the material world and not corresponding to the spiritual reality. The phases of separation and aggregation may therefore be elusive, but the liminal period is always present and is characteristic for gnosticism.

A tendency to replace the act by the word and to make it into a process in the soul of man is found throughout gnosticism and is in accordance with its spiritual goal, that is, the attainment of knowledge.[15,16] This cognition may in itself be perceived as spiritual sacrifices, as baptisms or as anointings.[17] Likewise, some texts contain descriptions of rituals which seem to be spiritual exercises on the symbolic level.[18] The spiritualization of ritual proceedings is in full accordance with the spiritual character of gnostic religion, which makes spirit and matter into polar opposites and rejects the latter as a fallen state of being. However, when the gnostics actually performed rituals, the rituals seem in the main to have been grouped around entrance into the community at the initiation and exit out of the community at death. Gnostic religion separated man from his state in the mortal world and prepared him for his aggregation into the world above. Baptism and anointing marked the point of separation from the state of being in the world, while the chrism and the bridal-chamber were sacraments of death and marked the aggregation to the state of final salvation.[19] Between these two points lies the period of transformation and danger directly reflected in gnostic mythology. This three-stage ritual pattern corresponds to the cosmological pattern outlined above.

Gnostic mythology is mainly concerned with the liminal area of the cosmos and its powers and rulers. The primary function of the gnostic myths is to invoke and sustain a process of change and transformation in the listeners, a process which occurs on the psychological level. The divergences and elaborations are reflections of meditation and thought, and express the process of transformation. The "initiand" is set apart from his society and culture, and his transformation is fulfilled on the cosmological level when the soul transcends the spheres after death. Thus, gnostic mythology is a liminal phenomenon, because of its transformative function.[20] It is a mythology of passage.

II

Characteristic for liminal persons is that they are interstructural: "They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified".[21] This two-fold character is evident through two forms of symbolism: that which in different ways is drawn from the spheres of death and disssolution, and that connected with gestation and parturition. In gnosticism, the symbolism of death and dissolution is expressed as the neophyte being dead and alive and yet not dead and not alive, all at the same time. The material body is symbolically conceived of as the tomb of the soul. Because he is locked inside a mortal body, man is living in the tomb and death becomes a chief symbol of being in the world.[22] "He who is born of the Mother is brought forth into death and the cosmos: he who is reborn of Christ is transported into life and the Eight".[23,24] The symbolism of gestation and parturition is expressed in an extensive and special use of embryological symbols. According to this, man is described as an abortion because he has not received the fertilizing *pneuma* symbolically associated with *sperma*.[25] However, the abortive state also includes an aspect of potentiality. When he is fertilized, he will become a living child and a product of the male.

The liminal period in general is the period when *gnosis* is communicated. Different systems of symbols may be used to express this *gnosis*. Physiological systems of symbols and systems of symbols based upon analogy with the human body are common,[26] because the human body with its processes is one of the most apt mediums

for contemplating and mediating complex structures of cosmology, theology, psychology and sociology—and of knitting together those different areas and relating them to each other. The human biological processes are then conceived to be "isomorphic" with cultural and structural processes on different levels.[27] In gnosticism, the embryological and mortological symbolism are parts of a wider context of physiological and biological symbolism. The body is the material vehicle for the spiritual element and is viewed as antagonistic to that element. Thus, the physiological processes of the body serve to intoxicate the spirit and make it numb. Bodily symbolism therefore often has negative connotations. Generally speaking, the body represents a complex system of structures. The orifices of the body and their discharges are the marginal points of the system. It is—like every structured system—vulnerable at its margins, and those marginal areas are seen as especially dangerous.[28] Gnostic religion implements bodily symbolism of a special kind. It uses symbolism which connects a negative evaluation of the female physiological processes to a negative evaluation of theology, cosmology, society and material existence. This symbolism concentrates on the female reproductive organs and their discharges. The discharges, because of their marginal character in relation to the human body, provide a set of symbols which are well adapted to liminality.[29]

The metaphor of birth is universally applied to describe creation. In gnosticism this metaphor also receives negative connotations because of the negative comprehension of reproduction: Each childbirth will lead to a diffusion of the spiritual element, which in this way is divided into smaller and smaller elements. The physiological act of birth is therefore a negative event. The beginning of the creation of the world below is symbolically described in terms of birth. Not as a normal birth, but as a pathological event, not the result of intercourse but the result of a sort of virgin-conception leading to an abortion. The liminal character of creation is expressed by this unusual form of conception and by the birth-product, a miscarriage. In contrast to a normal birth, which has only a passing liminal character, the abortion is permanently ambiguous.

According to a well-known myth, Sophia conceives a child without her marriage-partner, and that child is described as an

abortion. This child is either the lower Sophia, or the demiurge Ialdabaoth, or as told in *Orig. World*, Envy.[30] In all cases the product of the birth is the ruling will of the lower world. The material substance from which this world is derived is likened to an afterbirth which is cast aside at the birth: "Just as all the useless afterbirth of one who bears a little child falls, likewise the matter which came into being from the shadow was cast aside".[31]

In Sethian speculations our world has the shape of a womb, and the creativity of the lower world takes place in this "unclean and hurtful womb of disorder".[32] This womb is identified with Nature, and is divided into four parts which are called "Hymen, Afterbirth, Power and Water".[33] The comprehension of cosmos is founded upon the symbols of the hurtful womb, its creativity and its discharges, and mediated through gynecological descriptions: And Nature "turned her dark vagina and cast from her the power of fire which was in her from the beginning through the practices of the Darkness".[34] "And her unclean feminity was strong. And the wrathful womb came up and made the mind dry, resembling a fish which has a drop of fire and a power of fire".[35]

Behind these speculations lies medical knowledge which, as Paula Fredriksen has pointed out, is hidden in the gnostic pun on *hysterēma* "deficiency" and *hystera* "womb". She has demonstrated how the female disease of hysterical suffocation, which according to the Hellenistic medical science was caused by the dry and wandering womb, is used in the Sopia-symbolism and is the cause of her deficiency.[36] Existing embryological theory was also applied. According to this doctrine, it is the male who contributes form to the child and the female who contributes matter.[37] Sophia's creation is a female procreation, and therefore without form and structure—and the Valentinians called it "a false and female fruit".[38]

The Valentinians developed these speculations in a spiritual direction. The female discharges have turned into emotions which are emitted from the higher and the lower Sophia: grief, fear, bewilderment, ignorance and conversion. The different elements of the world below, material as well as psychical, are derived from these emotions.[39] The material symbolism of gynecology is left behind and partly changed by a symbolism based upon female psychology.

The material medium for the gynecological symbolism—or in Turner's words "the sensory pole" of the symbol—is the female organs of reproduction and their discharges or products.[40] A deeper study of symbols, however, will disclose several meanings connected with different levels of existence. According to Turner, a dominant symbol polarizes meaning. In addition to the sensory pole where the meaning content is closely related to its outward form, and which is "gross" both with regard to its lack of details and physiological content, there is also an ideological pole with which the structure and the values of morality and society are connected.[41] The function of symbols is not only to summarize experience, but more important in a liminal period, to be the source of new experience for the individual. Human experience and thinking are governed by the stimulating effect of those expressive symbols, and they are ruling forces in mythological development. As for the unclean womb of creation and its products, this is founded on a sensory experience. According to the Hippolytian account of Sethian thinking, "Heaven and earth are shaped like a womb having a navel in the middle. And, he says, if anyone wishes to visualize this shape, let him carefully examine a pregnant womb belonging to any animal he wishes, and he will find the design of heaven and earth and everything in between exactly laid out".[42] The gnostics connect the womb with the liminal birth products of miscarriage and afterbirth. On the sensory level, the symbols reflect the comprehension of central physiological processes, those of procreation and parturition. The symbolic meanings developed from this symbolism connect matter and therefore all material products with the birth products, and especially with the afterbirth. The human body, which is ultimately the product of the primary birth, is viewed negatively and designated "the prison of the body", "the body of darkness", or briefly "the beast".[43] And in the words of *The Treatise on Resurrection*: "The afterbirth of the body is old age, and you exist in corruption".[44]

On the theological level, the god of this world, the demiurge Ialdabaoth, is symbolized as the result of an incomplete conception, born as a miscarriage in darkness and ignorance.

On the cosmological level, the world is conceptualized through the gynecological symbols as the dark and unclean womb of disorder continually bringing forth its material products.

On the psychological level, a similar symbolism is applied, as is demonstrated by *The Exegesis on the Soul*. This treatise is an exposition of the different modalities of the soul. It plays upon the images of the soul as a whore and as a virgin, known from the mythology of Sophia.

The soul abandons her virgin-state with her Father, prostitutes herself, and falls into the hands of many robbers. But she repents and cries out to her Father. Because of her repentance she will in due time be restored to her virgin-state, and with gynecological symbols: "Indeed she (the soul) is female in her nature as well. She even has her womb".[45] The womb, however, is placed on the outside of the soul like the male genitalia. But when she repents, the Father will have mercy upon her, and her womb will be turned from its external domain inward and it will be baptized and cleansed of all its pollution.[46,47]

The symbols of the unclean womb and the pathological products of birth connect the different levels of experience and store information about several levels simultaneously. These symbols lend what they symbolize a special flavour, that of ambiguity and lack of structure which ultimately is grounded in the corresponding sensory experience. It is a gnostic insight and paradox that the rigorous cosmological, social and anthropological structures of this world have their origin in ambiguity and disorder, comprehended with the help of gynecological symbols.

The history of religions has always had a bias in favour of universal structures and symbols and in favour of the laws by which these are governed. If it were possible to find universal meanings in religious symbols, they would probably lie at the sensory level of the symbol, or at its material foundation. The more the meanings move towards the ideological pole, the more it is necessary to take into consideration the whole system of symbols. The development of gynecological symbols must be viewed in relation to the system of symbols, and especially in view of the dualistic character of gnostic religion, in relation to their polar opposites within the total set of symbols. The ideological opposite of the symbolism of the female procreation is found in gnosticism in the symbols evolved around the *pneuma* or the spiritual elements of the world above. At their sensory pole they have a physiological foundation in semen. The

spermatic symbolism varies between being comprehended spiritually and being confused with its sensory pole. The spiritual elements are then identified with the male semen.[48] The contrast between female conception without seed and spermatic conception is one of the major symbolic lines of orientation in gnostic relgion. It represents the liminal, ambiguous and transformative in contrast to the structured, unambiguous and accomplished. The liminal period is marked by an ample use of female symbols, while the state of salvation to come is marked by symbols of masculinity. As put by the Valentinians: "As long as we were children of the female only, as of a dishonourable union, we were incomplete, childish, without understanding, weak and without form, brought forth like abortions, in short, we were children of the woman. But having been given form by the Saviour, we are the children of the man and the bride-chamber",[49,50] or as nicely summed up in *Zostrianos*: "Flee from the madness and bondage of femininity and choose for yourselves the salvation of masculinity".[51]

III

Bodily symbolism is used to describe cosmology, psychology and theology. There is another structured system which uses the body as its symbol, and that is the social structure. Sociological analyses of gnostic religion have concentrated on the structure of the archontic world with the chief-*archon* at the top. It has been regarded as a direct reflection of the social structure against which the gnostics were opposed. According to this simple social model, the demiurge and his *archons* are seen either as an image of the system of secular powers, i.e. of the *Imperium Romanum*,[52] or as an image of the ecclesiastical powers, i.e. of the hierarchical order of the Catholic Church.[53]

Mary Douglas refers to the body as a correlation factor in sociological analysis. According to Douglas' hypothesis, the different images of the body are used to reflect and enforce the experience of the social system.[54] There is an agreement between social and bodily control systems, and this agreement may also be extended to the level of ideology. The control of the body is a reflection of the control of the society, and is also applicable to other areas

of the culture. This hypothesis opens an interesting perspective for the study of gnostic religion, especially in relation to liminal symbolism, aspects of which will be suggested below. The gnostic comprehension of the human body is twofold. First, the body is connected with the hierarchical order of the *archons*, and is a strict and rigorous structure. Second, the body is conceived of as a dark and sluggish vehicle for the pure spirit. According to the first view, the different *archons* furnish man with the different components of his soul and his body. This is Rabbinical knowledge rooted in astrology.[55] Each *archon* is connected with a planet, and together they make up "the hebdomad of the week".[56] The whole multitude of the heavenly powers correspond to the solar year and number 365.[57] "Then consequently ... man also has 365 bodily parts, so that to each individual power one part is allotted".[58] This is man made in the image of God as told in the Genesis. All his psychic and material components are furnished by the powers, beginning with his head and working downwards: "The first one began to create the head: Eteraphaope-Abron created his head; Meniggesstroeth created the brain; Asterechme the right eye; Thaspomocha the left eye; Yeronumos the right ear; Bissoum the left ear; Akioreim the nose; Banen-Ephroum the lips; Amen the teeth, etc.".[59] Special powers were set over the different senses. Demons preside over the passions and the emotions.[60] At last man is locked into the mortal body.[61] Except for his spiritual seed within, man is, in both body and soul, a product of the *archons*' creativity. He is also, as a structured system, in complete correspondence with the heavenly hierarchy of the *archons*, and according to astrological knowledge, in this way sympathetically connected to them.[62] As the crown of their work, the chief-*archon* implanted in Adam the desire for sexuality, corresponding to the Biblical command: "Be fruitful and multiply".[63]

The body is thus conceived of as a rigorous system with a clear structure. The different parts of the human body and soul are connected with the planetary powers, and there is little room for individual freedom. According to Douglas' hypothesis, this type of bodily comprehension would correspond to a social system which in the same manner lays great weight on the preservation of a clear and well-defined structure, a system with minutely defined rules for

the behaviour of the individual. Gnostic religion received a strong impetus from the Old Testament and especially from Genesis. This impetus could hardly have existed without some sort of dependence on Jewish religion and the Jewish social world. The story of the creation of man used by the gnostics is strongly rooted in the anthropogony of Genesis. Its elaborations and details are taken from Rabbinical speculations. The demuirge and his *archons* are a clear caricature of the God of Genesis, the Lord of Hosts. Man is bound to this God and his multitude of demonic servants as a puppet on a string. With 365 threads he is linked to God and his hosts of *archons* and powers. In the Jewish religion the connecting link between God and man was the written and the oral Law. This was the ruling force of the Jewish society, making the Jew a member of that society. The Jewish legal system with its prescriptions and rules set strict internal limits for its members and well-defined external boundaries. In gnosticism, this social model received its mythological counterpart in a conception of the human body divided into 365 different and defined parts, with each part ruled by a heavenly power turned demonic.

The gnostics aimed at freedom from the power of the *archons* who had made the body, and at freedom from the Law: "Therefore those who know these things have been set free from the rulers who made the world ... Thus if anyone confess the crucified, he is still a slave, and under the power of those who made the bodies; he who denies (him) has been set free from them, and knows the (saving) dispensation made by the unorginate Father. Salvation is for the soul alone; the body is by nature corruptible. He (Basilides) says that even the prophecies themselves came from the rulers who made the world, and that the law in particular came from their chief, him who led the people out of the land of Egypt".[64]

Their contempt for the Law and the Lawmaker is clearly expressed in their writings; they felt no obligation towards either of them: "All the prophets and the law spoke from the Demiurge, a silly god (in his view), and they were foolish and knew nothing".[65] "Therefore the commandments of the Old and the New Testaments are superfluous, if anyone is saved, as Valentinus says, by nature, or if anyone is faithful and elect by nature, as Basilides supposes".[66]

On the contrary, some of them expressed their antinomianism by the desire to do everything forbidden by the Law: The *archons* made the Law to make man slave, therefore complete freedom consisted of a systematic violation of the precepts of the Law. The Carpocratians, for instance, had to commit every kind of deed, because if they had not been in every action of the world, something was lacking in their freedom and the angels who made the world would again send them into bodies. When, however, they had committed everything, they were free from the power of these angels, and could ascend to God who is above the Demiurge.[67] The Cainites believed that an angel was present at every sinful and base action they committed, and therefore they said: "O thou angel, I make use of thy work; O thou power, I accomplish thy deed".[68] The different acts forbidden by the Law are thus closely connected with the angels who made the world in the same way as the different parts of the soul and the body were connected with the *archons* and angels. The connection between the precepts of the Law and the angels on the one hand, and the different parts of the human body and the angels on the other, draw together the social reality of the Law, the mythological superstructure, and the human body. It is thus likely that the comprehension of each area reflects, enforces and determines the comprehension of the other areas.

Generally speaking, the gnostic, with his faith in the free and unbound spirit and fettered by the archontic soul and material body—which together make up a structured system of evil—was not likely to have had any sympathy with any form of social system. According to Douglas, this way of comprehending the body reveals that social forms have no meaning. The society is a system which does not function, and the social experience is that of man being in the clutches of its evil powers. The body becomes a symbol of evil in contrast to the pure spirit. Everything which fetters the spirit to the body, as for example sexuality, also symbolizes evil. The confirmation of this type of belief is found in the bodily ecstacy, which is the true proof of being outside the body. This type of belief is found in the millenarian movements.[69] The gnostic no longer had any interest in the usual human societies or in social obligations, but had joined "The Acosmic Brotherhood of Salvation",[70] a society consisting of the spiritual selves of man. He had separated himself

from the societies of the world, be it the Jewish community, the Christian Church or the Roman Empire—but he had not yet reached his final destination in the World Above. He was in a transitional state, and his social group had the characteristics of a liminal society, termed by Turner as *communitas*.[71]

According to Turner, *communitas* is that which emerges where social structure does not exist. It takes place in liminality and has an aspect of potentiality. In primitive religions, *communitas* exists only in the liminal phase and is dissolved when the neophytes are aggregated into the structured society. In societies with an increasing specialization, it may become an institutionalized state and become permanent, as was the case in gnosticism.

Communitas is a simple social structure, a relatively undifferentiated community of equal individuals under the authority of the elders or the instructors. Family-bonds or obligations are of no significance, position in a status-hierarchy no longer counts, personal property does not exist, sexual ties are insignificant. The different aspects of *communitas* are found to a greater or lesser degree in the different gnostic movements. Basically, a *communitas* always confronts a structured society, be it in the liminal transition of primitive religions or as a permanent institution in other religions. Therefore *communitas* has two directions: opposition to the existing structure—an anti-structure, and maintenance of the communion on which it is built. Both directions are clearly present in the gnostic religion. The anti-structure of gnostic *communitas* is revealed in its antinomian character, be it as freedom from or as rebellion against the Law; in the violating of family-ties, either in the form of absolute ascetism or as promiscuity; and in the abolishment of status-distinctions. *Communitas* is established upon the principle of equality within. According to the Carpocratian sect, "The righteousness of God is a communion with equality ... he makes no distinction of rich or poor, people or ruler, foolish and wise, female and male, free and slave".[72] The usual form of address among the gnostics was "brothers" and "sisters". According to Plotinus they called even the lowest man brother.[73] They regarded themselves as being without external domination, and used the designation "the generation without a king".[74] No designations existed between the heretics described by Tertullian, even their cult-roles were not

fixed, but were continually changing.[75] The Carpocratians had no private property, but owned everything in common. Likewise several of the Nag-Hammadi texts stress the evil of property.[76] Ecstasy was a means of revelation. Valentinus' disciple, Marcus, is said to have given his female-followers the ability to prophecy as a special token of spiritual grace.[77] The libertine sects described by Epiphanius made use of sexual practices as an instrument for immediate communion.[78]

The metaphor used for *communitas* is simple. It is the Pauline image of Christ as the head and the *ecclesia* as the body. The *Interpretation of Knowledge* from Nag Hammadi concentrates upon the organization of the congregation.[79] Weight is laid on the equality of the members who all belong to the same body, vis-à-vis their spiritual head who is Christ. Although some of them were more richly bestowed with charisma, e.g. the gift of prophecy and spiritual speech, these were in reality gifts which belonged to all the members equally, therefore those who possessed these gifts were to share them with their fellow-members. The tractate reflects a *pneumatic*-charismatic organization of the community in contrast to the hierarchical order of the Catholic Church.[80]

A special problem is the role played by women among the gnostic sects. On the one hand, they were permitted a rather free position in relation to the position offered to women in the Christian religion.[81] On the other hand, there was a strong rejection of femininity in the Nag Hammadi-texts. The female nature and especially female sexuality had a negative symbolic value, and were strongly condemned. This apparent contradiction can easily be solved. In a liminal community—at least ideally—the sex-distinctions are wiped out and transcended. Women are admitted on the condition that their sexual natures are repressed and in this way neutralized. An example is *The Dialogue of the Saviour* where Mary together with Judas and Matthew receive the special teaching of the Lord, but He bids them among other things to "pray in the place where there is no woman (and) Destroy the works of femaleness".[82]

IV

Victor W. Turner has pointed out that *gnosis* is obtained during the liminal period. It is a period of instruction and reflection intended to transform the nature of the neophyte and make him into another kind of human being. In this process myths and symbols have paradigmatic functions, not as models for behaviour, but on a higher level as components in a dialectical soteriological process.[83] Culture is torn apart and its factors are recombined in strange patterns and shapes which—with a loan from Paul Ricoeur—"Gives rise to thought",[84]—and finally recombined in a meaningful way in relation to the state to come.[85] In gnosticism, two examples will illustrate this.

The demiurge and his mother, central characters in the myths, act in different ways within a liminal context as symbols or paradigms of the liminal situation. Ialdabaoth, the sinister, frightening but also comical maker of the material world is a negative paradigm of liminal man. His place is between the spiritual world above and the material world below. He is a monstrous and disproportioned being with the face of a lion, or of both a lion and a serpent, with fiery eyes and sometimes with snake-like legs.[86] He is born as an abortion, conceived without a father.[87] He is androgynous and because of his double-sex capable of producing out of himself.[88] He is creative, but never original: His creativity is an outburst of his delight of imitations.[89] He repeatedly reveals his ignorance of the existential structure, which is based on the distinction between *pneuma*/lack of *pneuma*.[90] By being a caricature of material man, he becomes as a soteriological paradigm a component in a dialectical process through which a new and spiritual concept of man is generated: In his lack of structure, both on the external and the internal level, he can be compared with the Trickster, which according to Turner, is a symbol of the liminal personality.[91]

The negative aspects of liminality have their counterpart in another liminal entity in the gnostic mythological universe, who, like Ialdabaoth, belongs to the intermediate zone. This is the mother of the demiurge. Her name is Sophia—Wisdom. Her place is in the eighth sphere above the seven spheres of the *archons*, but

below the spiritual world. Both because of her mythological placement and because of the functions she fulfills, she is entitled to be called a liminal entity.

Originally Sophia belonged in the World above, but either because of an urge to know the Father, or in order to create something of her own and thus imitate the Father, she conceives by herself alone.[92] She gives birth to what is characterized as an abortion. This is the demiurge Ialdabaoth. Because of her transgression she can no longer dwell in her original home. But because of her repentance and sorrow she is permitted to stay in the highest part of the intermediate zone, just below the spiritual world, waiting for her final salvation.[93,94] When the consequences of her fall are wiped out, she will again be admitted into that world. In this way Sophia becomes both the initiator and the symbol of the fall, and also the initiator and the symbol of the salvation.

Gnostic religion is founded upon a tension between spirit and matter. This tension is both the result of and the reflection of a tension within God and within man. This tension leads in the elaborated systems to endless lines of emanations which nevertheless cannot hide the fact that it is impossible to resolve this tension on a logical level. It can only be solved within the world of symbols. The structuralistic axiom that the elements of a cultural system can be reduced to binary polarities is made relevant by the dualistic character of the gnostic religion. In gnostic systems the binary oppositions are loaded with meaning, and structuralism therefore becomes a tool for the history of religion. According to Lévi-Strauss, "Mythical thought always works from the awareness of oppositions towards their progressive mediations".[95] The basic polarity of spirit and matter is mediated by the element of the soul which may participate either on the spiritual level and then proceed upwards or on the material level and then move downwards. Mythologically, this polarity is concentrated in the figure of Sophia that unites the components of both the fallen state and the state of salvation, and thus expresses the gnostic tension of the divided self. The Ophites called her, according to Irenaeus, Sophia *Prounikos*, which means Wisdom Sexual Desire, a characteristic which sums up the core of her character and reveals its tension.[96] The conflict between being in God and not being in God is systematized in the

gnostic myths of passage and is expressed through different levels of existence, with the spiritual world above and the material world below symbolizing the two polar states of being, and with the intermediate realm of liminality between. According to Turner, "It is interesting to note, how, by the principle of the economy (or parsimony) of symbolic reference, logically antithetical processes of death and growth may be represented by the same tokens, ... This coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both":[97] The description fits Sophia. She is an interstructural entity who represents the two opposed states of fall and salvation in one single figure. She lives out the tension of gnostic life, connecting in one powerful symbol the previous state of the fall and the coming state of salvation, and is therefore a most effective liminal symbol.

The gnostic is no longer a member of the worldly society nor is he ruled over by the God of this world, but all the same he has not yet attained full salvation. On the contrary, he lives in continuous liminality. Likewise, Sophia is not admitted into the fullness of the world above, but must wait outside in the intermediate zone until the consummation of time: "And she was taken up not to her own aeon but above her son, that she might be in the ninth until she has corrected her deficiency".[98] Sophia is still ambiguous and therefore dangerous. This is a striking characteristic of those going through liminality. According to Mary Douglas, "Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others".[99] The Valentinians taught that a great disturbance occurred among the other aeons because of Sophia's vain attempt to know the Father. Sophia herself was allowed to stay within *pleroma*, but her thought, which is called "an abortion" and is identical with the lower Sophia, was separated from her and cast outside: "He immediately separated the abortion of Sophia—which was without form, had been born of one (only) and without marriage-partner—from the entirety of the aeons in order that the perfect aeons might not be embarassed on seeing it because of its shapelessness".[100] The lower Sophia has no structure and is therefore a danger and an embar-

rassment to those within the existing structure. She must remain outside until she is formed and informed and thereby becomes in complete accordance with the structured society of the aeons.

The liminal character of gnostic religion makes the archontic realm of the cosmos of special importance in gnostic mythology. There is a clear correspondence between the monsters and terrors of that realm, continually dwelt upon in the myths and painstakingly depicted, and the "betwixt and between" status of the gnostic believer. This stage, however, is transitory. In the end the saved will reveal their true nature just as moths coming out of the pupa.[101] In some of the Nag Hammadi scriptures, a ritual-pattern of enthronement is unveiled.[102] The enthronement takes place at the ascension of the soul through the spheres and includes an unction. In the *Hyp.Arch.* the coming of the True Man is coupled with the bestowal of ultimate knowledge and anointing with the Unction of the Life Eternal. This anointing, which the True Man has from the undominated generation may be viewed "as part of a royal investiture ceremony".[103] The saved are those who belong to the generation which does not have a king.[104] On the contrary, they have themselves become kings and triumphantly leave the sphere of the *archons*' domain.[105] The enthronement of the saved is connected with the final destruction of the *archons*; the *archons* will go to perdition.[106] These two mythologems, the enthronement of the soul and the destruction of the *archons*, are connected, and together signify the end of liminality. In the liminal period, the *archons* appeared to be strong while the gnostics weak. This reflects in a symbolic way an important feature of liminality; that of status reversal: "*Crudely put, the liminality of the strong is weakness—of the weak, strength. Or again, the liminality of the wealth and nobility is poverty and pauperism—of poverty, ostentation and pseudohierarchy*".[107]

In conclusion, gnostic religion can be described as a religion where man faces an existential dilemma. The dilemma is the human problem accentuated by a dualistic religious system: How shall man overcome the tension between his spiritual self and his material self? Is he destined to dwell in the world of matter or can he transcend into the spiritual world? The intention of gnostic religion was to overcome the dilemma by making its two horns into the two poles of a dynamic movement, which gradually trans-

formed the biological human being into a spiritual entity. For this purpose, life was conceived of as a period of permanent liminality and religion became "*gnosis*".

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[1] Victor W. Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*", *The Forest of Symbols*, N.Y. 1967, pp. 93-111.

[2] The history of religions insists on non-reductionistic methods to discover the meaning of religious facts. This attitude rules out theories which "explain" religious facts on the basis of sociological or psychological factors. Traditionally, the discipline also rules out explanations referring to God, although it has always been more uncertain with regard to theories that refer to the concept of "the sacred". Its problem is to avoid reductionistic explanations and to find perspectives and points of reference which are neither theological not ontological. Cf. also H. H. Penner, "Myth and Ritual: A Wasteland or a Forest of Symbols?", *History and Theory*, Studies in the Philosophy of History. Beihefte 8: On Method in the History of Religions, ed. J. S. Helfer, Connect, 1968, pp. 46-57.

[3] Cf. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Selected Essays, N.Y. 1973, p. 125.

[4] Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "Qu'est-ce qu'un texte? expliquer et comprendre", *Hermeneutik und Dialektik*, vol. 2, ed. R. Bubner et al., Tübingen, 1970, pp. 181-200.

[5] A system of religious meaning, as gnosticism, could in similar ways be correlated with historical and psychological realities, as done by Hans Jonas in *The Gnostic Religion*, Boston, 1967.

[6] A. L. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, London, 1960.

[7] Turner, 1967, p. 94.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 110.

[11] V. W. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, Chic., 1969, pp. 125 ff.

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 129 ff.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 107 ff.

[14] See John D. Turner, "The Gnostic Threefold Path to Enlightenment", *Novum Testamentum* XXII, 4 (1980), pp. 332 ff.

[15] Cf. H. Jonas, "Myth and Mysticism: A Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought", *Philosophical Essays. From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974, pp. 291-304.

[16] Cf. R. Reitzenstein, *Die Hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*, Darmstadt, 1966, p. 243.

[17] Hippolyt, *Refutatio* V 9, 4; CG VI, 6 *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (*Disc.*) 57:18-25; CG V, 5 *The Apocalypse of Adam* (*Apoc.Adam*) 85:22-31; CG II, 6 *The Exegesis on the Soul* (*Exeg.Soul*) 131:34-132:2.

[18] Illustrating examples are the rituals found in *The Second Book of Jeu*, *The Books of Jeu and the untitled text in the Bruce Codex*, ed. C. Schmidt, transl. and notes V. MacDermot, (Nag Hammadi Studies 13), Leiden, 1978.

[19] The eucharist may be connected with both or be a rite which was regularly repeated. The eucharist, however, was not one of the important sacraments, cf. W. Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, Göttingen, 1907, p. 305; H.-G. Gaffron, *Studien zum koptischen Philippusevangelium unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Sakramente*, Bonn, 1969, pp. 171-174.

[20] V. W. Turner, "Myth and Symbol", *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, N.Y. 1968, p. 576.

[21] Turner, 1967, p. 96; Turner, 1968, p. 576.

[22] *Ap.John* (II, 1) 21:4-13; CG II, 7 *The Book of Thomas the Contender* (*Thom.Cont.*) 138:39-139:12; CG VII, 4 *The Teaching of Silvanus* (*Teach.Silv.*) 106:9-14; CG VIII, 1 *Zostrianos* (*Zost.*) 1:10-21; CG VIII, 2 *The Letter of Peter to Philip* (*Ep.Pet.Phil.*) 137:6-10.

[23] *Exc.Theod.* 80, 1.

[24] Quoted from Jonas, p. 58.

[25] Cf. below, p. 18.

[26] Turner, 1967, p. 107 f.

[27] Turner, 1967, p. 96; Turner 1968, p. 580.

[28] See especially Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger, An Analysis of the Concepts of Polution and Taboo*, London, 1979, p. 121; and E. Leach, *Culture and Communication. The logic by which symbols are connected*, N.Y. 1981, p. 62.

[29] Cf. P. Fredriksen, "Hysteria and the Gnostic Myths of Creation", *Vigiliae Christianae* 33 (1979), pp. 287-290.

[30] CG II, 5 *On the Origin of the World* (*Orig.World*) 99: 2-11; CG II, 4 *The Hypostatis of the Archons* (*Hyp.Arch.*) 94:9-19; Hippolyt, *Refutatio*, VI, 30, 6 ff.

[31] *Orig. World* 99: 17-20.

[32] Hippolyt, *Refutatio* V, 19, 11-20. See also Epiphanius, *Panarion*, XXV, 5, 1-3; Irenaeus, *Adv.haer.* I, 31, 2.

[33] CG VII, 1 *The Paraphrase of Shem* (*Paraph.Shem*) 5:22 ff.

[34] *Paraph. Shem* 27: 2-5.

[35] *Paraph. Shem* 18: 34-19:4.

[36] Fredriksen 1979.

[37] Arist., *Gen.An.*, 729a 9 f.; 730a 24 f.

[38] Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, I, 2, 4.

[39] Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, I, 4, 1-2.

[40] Turner, 1967, pp. 27-29.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[42] Hippolyt, *Refutatio*, V, 19, 11.

[43] *Ap.John* (II, 1) 31:4; *Paraph.Shem.* 1:15; 19:27, 45:34.

[44] CG I, 3 *The Treatise on Ressurection* (*Trear.Res.*) 47:17-19.

[45] *Exeg.Soul* 127:21-22.

[46] *Exeg.Soul* 131:13-132:2.

[47] See F. Wisse, "On Exegeting 'The Exegesis on the Soul' ", in *Les textes de Nag Hammadi*, ed. J-E. Menard, (NHS 7), Leiden 1975, pp. 72 ff.

[48] Hippolyt, *Refutatio*, VII, 21, 1 ff.; Epiphanius, *Panarion*, XXVI, 4, 1 ff.

[49] Quotations are made from W. Foerster, *Gnosis. A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, English transl., ed. by R. McL. Wilson, Oxford, 1972; and from *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. J. M. Robinson, Leiden, 1977.

[50] Clement of Alex., *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 68; cf. also 79; Irenaeus, *Adv.haer.* I, 21, 5.

[51] *Zost.* 131: 5-8.

[52] H. G. Kippenberg, "Versuch einer soziologischen Verortung des antiken Gnostizismus", *Numen* 17 (1970), pp. 211-232.

[53] E. H. Pagels, " 'The Demiurge and his Archons'—A Gnostic View of the Bishop and Presbyters?" *Harvard Theological Journal* 69 (1976), pp. 301-324.

[54] Douglas 1979, pp. 114 ff.

[55] See especially B. Pearson, "Biblical Exegesis in Gnostic Literature", Supplementary Volume I to *Sion*, ed. M. E. Stone, Jerusalem, 1975, pp. 70-80; also R. Van den Broek, "The Creation of Adam's Psychic Body in the Apocryphon of John", *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions*, (presented to Gilles Quispel on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday), ed. by R. Van den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren, Leiden, 1980, pp. 38-57.

[56] *Ap.John* (II, 1) 11:34-35.

[57] Irenaeus, *Adv.haer.* I, 24, 3.

[58] Epiphanius, *Panarion*. XXIV, 7, 6.

[59] *Ap.John* (II, 1) 15:29-17:31.

[60] *Ibid.*, 17:32-19:6.

[61] *Ibid.*, 20:28-21:13.

[62] See Jonas 1970, pp. 156-161.

[63] Gen. 1:28.

[64] Irenaeus, *Adv.haer.* I, 24, 4-5.

[65] Hippolyt, *Refutatio*, VI, 35, 1.

[66] Clement of Alex., *Stromata*, V, 3; see also Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VI, 31; Irenaeus, *Adv.haer.* I, 30, 10; 23, 4; Epiphanius, *Panarion*, XL, 2, 8; Clement of Alex., *Stromata*, VII, 4.

[67] Irenaeus, *Adv.haer.* I, 25, 4.

[68] *Ibid.* I, 31, 2.

[69] M. Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, N.Y., 1970, pp. XII-XIII.

[70] Jonas, 1970, p. 264.

[71] Turner, 1969, pp. 96-165.

[72] Clement of Alex., *Stromata*, III, 2.

[73] *Enneaden* II, 9, 18;

[74] *Hyp.Arch.* 97:4-5; *Orig.World* 125:3-7; 126:36-127:17; *Apoc.Adam* 82:19-20; Hyppolyt, *Refutatio*, V, 8, 2.

[75] Clement of Alex., *Stromata*, III, 2.

[76] *Gosp.Thom.* 44:2-35; 51:4-5; CG VI, 1 *The Acts of Peter* (*ActsPet.*) 11:27-12:13.

[77] Irenaeus, *Adv.haer.* I, 13, 3-4.

[78] Epiphanius, *Panarion*, XXVI, 4, 1 ff.

[79] CG XI, 1 *Interp.Know.* esp. 15-21.

[80] See K. Koschorke, "Gnostic Instructions on the Organization of the Congregation: The Tractate Interpretation of Knowledge from CG XI", *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, vol. II, ed. B. Layton, Leiden, 1981, pp. 757-769.

[81] See E. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, London, 1979, pp. 48-70.

[82] CG III, 5 *Dial.Sav.* 144:18-20; cf. also *Gosp.Thom.* 51:18-26.

[83] Turner, 1968, p. 577.

[84] *The Symbolism of Evil*, N.Y. 1969, pp. 347 ff.

[85] Turner, 1967, p. 106.

[86] *Hyp.Arch.* 94:16-17; *Orig.World* 100:5-7; *Ap.John* (II, 1) 10:7-10.

[87] *Ap.John* (II, 1) 9:25-10:7; *Orig.World* 99:23-100:1; *Hyp.Arch.* 94:9-17.
[88] *Hyp.Arch.* 94:34-95:4; *Orig.World* 100:7.
[89] Irenaeus, *Adv.haer.* I, 5, 3.
[90] For instance, he does not distinguish between the psychic and the pneumatic Eve, the material serpent and its spiritual counterpart, between the crucified Jesus and the spiritual Christ.
[91] Turner, 1969, pp. 580-581.
[92] *Ap.John* (II, 1) 9:25-10:19; *Hyp.Arch.* (II, 4) 94:4-19; Hippolyt, *Refutatio*, VI. 30, 6-8.
[93] *Ap.John* (II, 1) 13:32-14:13; Irenaeus, *Adv.haer* I, 7, 1.
[94] Cf. below, p. 35-36.
[95] "The Structural Study of Myth", *Reader in Comparative Religion*, ed. W. A. Lessa and E. Z. Vogt, N.Y. 1979, p. 194.
[96] Irenaeus, *Adv.haer.* I, 30, 3 (also by the Barbelognostics, I, 29, 4).
[97] Turner, 1967, p. 99.
[98] *Ap.John* (II, 1) 14:9-13.
[99] Douglas, 1979, p. 96.
[100] Hippolyt, *Refutatio*, VI, 31, 4.
[101] Turner, 1967, p. 94.
[102] M. Scopello, "Un rituel idéal d'intronisation dans trois textes gnostiques de Nag Hammadi", (NHS 14), ed. R. McL. Wilson, Leiden, 1978, pp. 91-96.
[103] B. Layton, "The Hypostasis of the Archons (Conclusion)", *Harvard Theological Review* 69 (1976), pp. 78-79.
[104] *Ibid.* p. 79.
[105] *Hyp.Arch.* 96:29-97:14; *Orig.World* 125:32-127:17.
[106] *Orig.World* 125:11-12.
[107] Turner, 1969, p. 200.